

Is this what I deserve? Self-deservingness, welfare experiences, and satisfaction with democracy

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- Maintenance of liberal democracies ultimately depends on citizens' support for democracy (Linz and Stephan, 1996)
- Despite being a pivotal element in democracies, the role of the welfare state in shaping democratic legitimacy remains underexplored.
- If the welfare state can shape their political attitudes and behaviors (Soss, 1999) \Rightarrow Experiences with welfare institutions should influence satisfaction with democracy (SWD)

- Lit. focus on welfare generosity as a predictor of SWD (Sirovatka et al 2019; Kumlin, 2013; Armigeon and Guthmann, 2014).
- Those who focus on welfare design explore welfare attitudes or political participation (see Larsen, 2019).
- Only Kumlin (2004) delved into how structural designs impact political trust and SWD, but the data is cross-sectional.
- **RQ:** Does participating in welfare programs actually shape SWD? Do structural designs matter?

Self-perceptions of deservingness

- Literature has explored how public opinion evaluates the deservingness of target groups and how those opinions work as a source of legitimacy (Reeskens and van der Meer, Van Oorschot et al 2017).
 - What about how citizens evaluate themselves?
- CARIN criteria from Van Oorschot (2000, 2006) give us some clues.
 - **Reciprocity**: Perceptions of deservingness based on past contributions and a relation of reciprocity with the state.
 - **Need**: Since the least well-off do not meet reciprocity criteria, they will restore in their situation of necessity.
 - **Identity**: Regardless of income, individuals can perceive themselves as deserving by the principle of citizenship.

Expectations towards the welfare state

- Subjective sources of welfare legitimacy can turn into welfare expectations
- **Expectancy-disconfirmation theory:** Individuals judge public services based on expectations (Van Ryzin, 2013).
 - dissatisfaction arises when expectations exceed actual performance.
- SWD is driven by the (mis)match between individual expectations and institutional responses. \Rightarrow SWD will increase when institutional responses align with welfare expectations.

Policy feedbacks: The institutional response

- Heterogeneity of institutional responses derives from different welfare designs \Rightarrow **Policy feedbacks** literature.
- Based on the program's design, welfare recipients have different experiences that shape their political attitudes and behaviors (Kumlin, 2004; Soss, 1999)
- Importantly, policy feedback distinguishes between resources and interpretive effects (Pierson, 1993, Campbell, 2013).
 - the nature of the interactions can generate mismatches in both material and symbolic dimensions.

Earning-related programs

- Since benefits are earnings-related, they satisfy individual expectations of reciprocity.
- Interactions with welfare authorities are horizontal and respectful (Soss 1999) \Rightarrow Signaling that benefits are earned entitlements.
- Thus, the alignment between recipients' expectations and institutional responses suggests a positive effect on SWD.

Means-tested programs

- Eligibility rules and administrative procedures often signal a diminished status of citizens (Schneider and Ingram, 1993; Mettler, 2002; Watson, 2015) \Rightarrow not worthy, undeserving.
- Doubts about the effectiveness of means-tested programs in reducing poverty compared to other welfare designs (Brady and Burroway, 2012; Meyer and Wu, 2018).
- Even when these programs reduce material hardship, interactions based on paternalistic relationships (Bruch et al., 2010) decrease the sense of responsiveness of political institutions.
- These negative experiences undermine recipients' expectations based on necessity, leading to a decline in SWD.

- Expectations are ambiguous.
- Universal designs based on equality and impartiality (Rothstein, 1998) fulfill expectations derived from citizens as right-holders.
- Yet, the blind impartiality of universalism can conflict with recipients' notions of distributive fairness \Rightarrow Two mismatches:
 - Normative value conflict \Rightarrow Ideology
 - Inadequacy of benefits. \Rightarrow Income

Conditional effect of ideology

- Individuals who prioritize equality show stronger support for redistribution than those who emphasize meritocracy (Newman et al., 2015; Breznau, 2010; Neerdaels et al., 2026).
- Congruence theory argues that the implementation of certain policies can enhance SWD when those policies align with individuals' ideological preferences (Reher, 2015; Ferland, 2021).
- left-wing recipients will experience a normative match. However, for conservatives, the flat-rate nature of universal benefits conflicts with their meritocratic worldview.
- The effect of universal programs will be lower for right-wing individuals.

Conditional effect of income

- Intuitively, the effect should be stronger for low-income individuals \Rightarrow Marginal effect.
- Many stress that SWD increases when individuals perceive political institutions as fair (Saxton, 2021 ; Erlingson, 2014; van Ryzin, 2011; Magalhaes, 2016)
- For those whose expectations are driven by necessity, blind equality of universalism can be experienced as institutional indifference.
- Conversely, higher income groups, universal benefits fosters inclusiveness and democratic belonging (Rothsein, 1998).
- effect of universal programs will be lower for low-income individuals.

Subjective well-being as a mediator factor.

- Mechanism based on the psychological effects of welfare programs.
- administrative burden resulting from interactions with public administrations can be translated into psychological costs (Herd and Moynihan, 2018; Schneider and Ingram, 1993).
 - Importantly, burden varies across welfare designs (Herd and Moynihan, 2018; Lapham and Martinson, 2022).
- If the structural design of welfare programs affects subjective well-being by imposing an administrative burden, \Rightarrow personal experiences can spillover into evaluations of the democratic system (Soss, 1999).

- German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP) to test the hypotheses.
 - 47,465 individual-years and 27,130 unique individuals.
- **SWD** (0-11) \Rightarrow five main observation windows for this study: 2005, 2010, 2016, 2020, and 2021.
- Welfare programs: Dummies indicate whether individuals received or not benefits last year.
 - Earnings-related program \Rightarrow **ALGI**: insurance-based, temporary unemployment benefit funded by contributions
 - Means-tested program \Rightarrow **ALGII**: means-tested, tax-funded program providing a basic subsistence level.
 - Universal program \Rightarrow **Child benefits** (Kindergeld): €259 per child, generally paid until age 18.

Linear regression with individual and year FE and clustered std. errors at individual level.

$$SWD_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 W_{i,t-1} + X'_{it}\gamma + \alpha_i + \lambda_t + \varepsilon_{it}$$

- Covariates: age, health status, marital status, employment status, educational level, disposable HH income ($t - 2$), political ideology, and political interest, and the East-West Germany divide.
- Life satisfaction (0-10) as a proxy of subjective well-being.

Main regression models

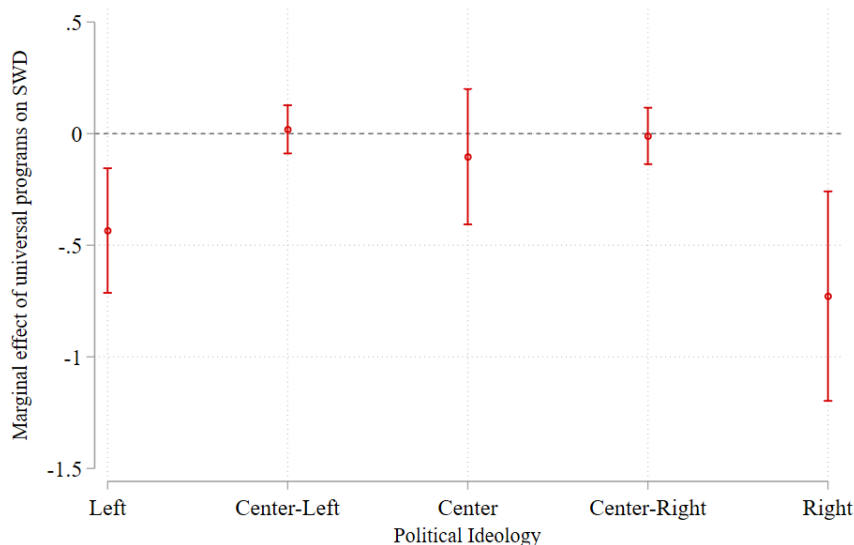
Table 1: FE Models for welfare programs and SWD.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
ALG I (Yes=1)	0.119 (0.15)				
ALG II (YES=1)		-0.300** (0.13)			
Child benefits (Yes=1)			-0.0550 (0.04)	-0.434*** (0.14)	-0.976* (0.54)
Yes × Center-Left				0.453*** (0.15)	
Yes × Center				0.331 (0.21)	
Yes × Center-Right				0.424*** (0.15)	
Yes × Right				-0.294 (0.27)	
Yes × Disposable income (t-2)					0.0902* (0.05)
Constant	1.001** (0.39)	1.025*** (0.39)	1.104*** (0.40)	1.281*** (0.41)	1.488*** (0.47)
Individual controls	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Individual FE	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Country FE	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Observations	47231	47231	47231	47231	47231

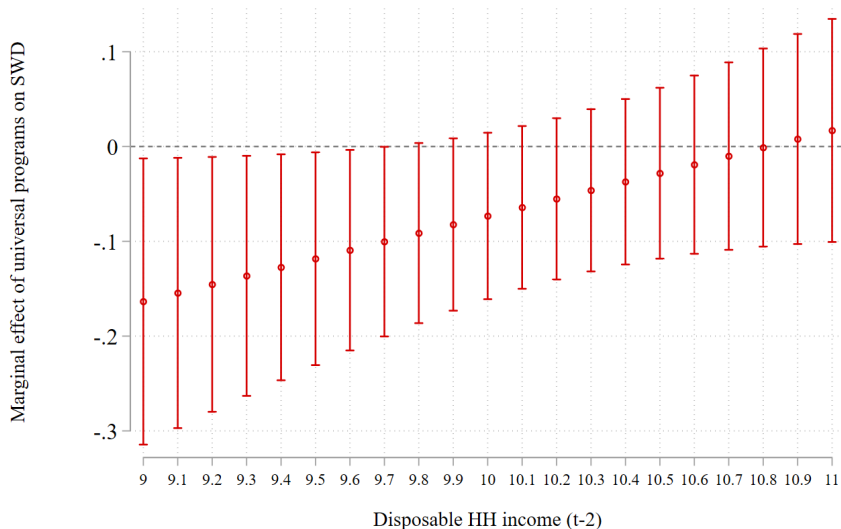
Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

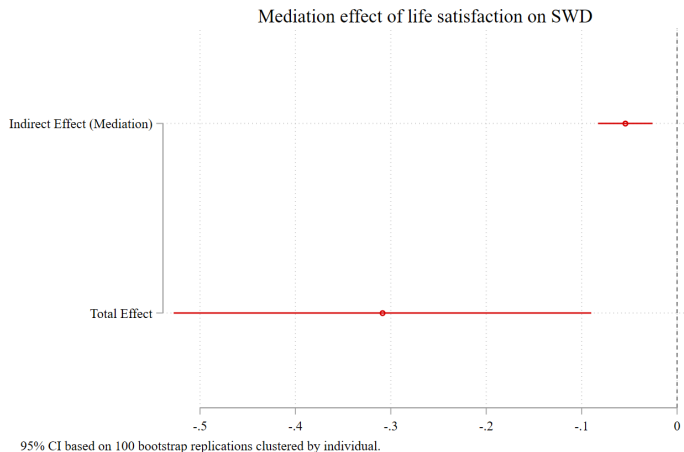
Interaction term: child benefits & ideology



Interaction term: child benefits & HH income



Mediating effect of life satisfaction



- $(-0.054/0. - 0.308)/100 \Rightarrow$ The **17.5%** of the effect of ALGII on SWD is mediated by life satisfaction.

Is it actually about becoming a recipient or about status loss?

Table 2: Robustness checks: Unemployment vs ALGII

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Unemployed (Yes=1)	-0.332*** (0.10)		-0.171* (0.10)	-0.145 (0.11)		-0.259** (0.10)
ALGII (Yes=1)		-0.361*** (0.12)	-0.297** (0.13)	-0.250 (0.15)		
ALGII × Unemployed				-0.112 (0.24)		
ALGII entry (Yes=1)					-0.434*** (0.12)	-0.371*** (0.12)
Constant	1.049*** (0.39)	1.076*** (0.39)	1.075*** (0.39)	1.076*** (0.39)	1.064*** (0.39)	1.069*** (0.39)
Individual controls	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Individual FE	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Country FE	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Observations	47231	47231	47218	47218	47231	47231

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

- Not multicollinearity issues (unemployment VIF = 1.24 in Model 6).

Conclusions

- Results suggest that (1) means-tested programs reduce SWD, (2) earnings-related has no effect, (3) the association of universal programs with SWD depends on ideational and material factors.
- The effect of welfare programs is mediated by its impact on individuals' well-being, at least in the case of means-tested programs.
- This paper contributes to (1) deservingness literature by theorizing about different sources of subjective legitimacy of welfare benefits, and (2) policy feedbacks lit. by demonstrating how different welfare institutions are associated with democratic values.

Shortcomings/issues to address

- Too many assumptions ($?_i$).
- Most of the results partly hold.
- Impossibility to completely disentangle entry effects from job loss effects \Rightarrow Data limitations does not allow for performing event study models not feasible
- Similar problems with income \Rightarrow multicollinearity is huge because ALG2 is not exogenous.

Thanks for your attention

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